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SAUL'S EXPERIENCE ON THE WAY TO DAMASCUS.

*THE NATURE OF THE CHANGE IT PRODUCED IN HIM AND ITS
EFFECT ON HIS DOCTRINE.*

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The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the external features of Saul's experience in his approach to Damascus. It does not concern itself with the question whether there was a veritable appearance to him of the risen Jesus. Accepting what is scarcely to be denied by any one, that Saul at this time passed through a notable crisis in his life, and ever afterward believed that he at that time received indubitable evidence that Christ had risen from the dead, it is proposed to inquire respecting the nature of the change wrought in Saul by this experience.

Rightly to understand this change, we must understand what sort of a man he was previous to this experience. Consider, then, his previous character and history.

1. He was a man of profound moral earnestness. Whatever faults of character or vices of life he had, frivolousness was not one of them. Earnestness did not begin with his conversion. Paul was always intense. This appears in all his references to his life before his conversion. Acts xxiii. 1: "I have lived before God in all good conscience until this day"; xxvi. 4: "My manner of life from my youth up, which was from the beginning among mine own nation, and at Jerusalem, know all the Jews; having knowledge of me from the first, if they be willing to testify, how that after the strictest sect of our religion, I lived a Pharisee." See also xxii. 3 ff.

2. He was an earnest seeker after righteousness. It would seem as if our Lord's blessing on those who hunger and thirst after righteousness could have been pronounced on Saul before his conversion. In Phil. iii. 6, he declares that in his Pharisaic

days he was, "touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless." Such blamelessness could only have been the result of earnest and persistent effort. To this agree also all his references to this period of his life. Compare Gal. i. 13; Acts xxiii. 1.

3. The method by which he sought to attain righteousness was a strict obedience to the law as interpreted by the Pharisees. This also is implied in Phil. iii. 6: "As touching the law a Pharisee . . . as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless." Compare also Acts xxii. 3; xxvi. 5; Gal. i. 14.

Now, a careful study of Paul's use of the term law in connection with righteousness, will show that what he means by righteousness by law, or the righteousness that is in the law, is not merely a righteousness which realizes the law's ideal, but something both more and less than that, viz., a righteousness which is attained, so far as attained at all, by a self-reliant effort to obey the law. As a factor in man's moral life, law is constantly the antithesis of faith. As a conceivable method of divine conduct toward men, it is the antithesis of grace. Law stands in Paul's vocabulary for that method of life according to which a man sets before himself what he conceives to be the demands of God, and gives himself to the endeavor to attain right character, and so to earn divine approval as a thing deserved at God's hand. Righteousness thus acquired, and in so far as it is thus acquired, is by its very nature self-righteousness. And this holds true whether we conceive of righteousness simply as right character and conduct in themselves, or according to Paul's more common method of thinking, as a character or an attitude toward God which makes us acceptable to God. For law awards a man simply what he deserves. In so far as it awards him anything else, it is itself something else than law. It is indeed possible to conceive of an order of things which should combine law with faith. That is, ideally, one might from the first moment of moral responsibility cast himself on God for help, and, by divine help always meeting the requirements of righteousness, present before the law a perfect character acquired in dependence on God. But, in fact, this is a theoretical possi-

bility only, which had no place in the Pauline or in the New Testament terminology. To any one who has given serious study to human nature as it now is and has been in past days, the reason for the omission of this theoretical possibility is not far to seek. The only practical possibilities, certainly the only possibilities of which Paul ever speaks, are, on the one hand, a self-dependent obedience (or disobedience) to the divine law, coupled with an expectation of standing before that law on one's own self-acquired merits, and, on the other hand, a reliance on the divine aid and an acceptance of the divine grace, which is called faith. And as between these alternatives, Paul distinctly declares that the former was his attitude before his acceptance of Christ.

Now, it is evident that the cherishing of this conception of righteousness as something to be attained only on a basis of law and of merit would inevitably be a serious obstacle to a hearty acceptance of Jesus, or would become so the moment the real spirit and teaching of Jesus were understood. Not only had Jesus unsparingly denounced the Pharisees, not only had he taught that the only way of access to God was not by one's power or goodness, but through faith in himself, Jesus; but the very spirit of humility and lowliness of mind which he exemplified and inculcated were calculated to repel one who had not only accepted as a dogma the Pharisaic idea of self-acquired righteousness, but had become imbued with the self-sufficient spirit likely to be cultivated by the holding of this dogma.

4. Saul had, before he became a Christian, attained as nearly perfect success in his effort to become righteous as under this method was possible. On this point we have his own testimony, given when he had become a Christian and had come to look back on his former life as a mistake and a failure. Gal. i. 4: "I advanced in the Jew's religion beyond many of mine own age, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers"; Phil. iii. 6: "Touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless."

5. His persecution of the Christians was in some sense conscientious. "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth"

(Acts xxvi. 9, ff.). Of the same purport is his word to Timothy: "I did it ignorantly in unbelief." These statements are of great importance as indicating the state of Paul's mind and heart during his career as a persecutor. They show us a man of profound moral earnestness pursuing a course of bitter persecution of the Christians under the stress of a sincere conviction of duty.

But on the other hand, they must not be pressed beyond their true significance. They stand in immediate connection with expressions on the apostle's part of strong condemnation of the course which he then pursued, expressions which prove that, whatever his sincerity at that time, he afterwards came to see that his conduct was wrong, not simply according to some objective standard, but as involving sin on his part. He does not, indeed, undertake to locate the exact point of his responsibility; he does not enter into a minute psychological analysis of his mental and moral state; and we, at least, cannot determine whether his sin consisted wholly in previous action, mental or other, by which he had made for himself an abnormal conscience, which conscience he now could not do otherwise than obey; or whether there was still in him, in the midst of his career as a persecutor, something of that moral obliquity which, vitiating all the mental processes as they applied to moral questions, could create and maintain a conviction the falsity and injustice of which was obscured from consciousness by the same perversion that created it. He contents himself with the paradoxical, but by no means inconsistent, statement, that he acted conscientiously, but acted wrongly and sinfully.

6. Despite his success in attaining the righteousness that is in the law, despite his conscientiousness in persecuting the Christians, Saul was not wholly at ease. The words of Jesus to him on the road to Damascus: "It is hard for thee to kick against the goads," imply three things: That Saul was at this time subject to certain influences tending to turn him from the course which he had chosen; that he was resisting those influences; that such resistance involved some struggle on his part. The precise nature of these influences it is difficult to state. That

they came from without is, indeed, suggested by the figure of the goad, but that they penetrated to the sphere of thought and feeling is not less implied in the statement that he was with difficulty resisting them. What Paul wrote afterward gives us at least, the hint that his discontent with himself lay in two directions and sprang from two sources. The paradoxical nature of his statement about his career as a persecutor, already referred to, strongly suggests that, at times at least, he could not exclude the doubt whether he was altogether right in his persecutions. The godly lives of those whom he was persecuting, their heroic endurance of persecution, the triumphant death of such an one as Stephen, these perhaps formed some part of the goad against which he was kicking. That he had as yet any inclination himself to accept Christ, cannot indeed be shown; rather all the evidence is to the contrary. He was an ox pressed by the goad, urging him he knew not whither; the very intensity of his conscientious conviction that he was right would lead him to suppress the suggestion he was wrong long before it had reached the point of an insinuation that he himself must become a Christian; the conscientiousness that lay back of that conviction would forbid him peace of mind while he suppressed this half latent suggestion.

But whatever doubt there may be concerning Paul's precise state of mind with reference to his conduct as a persecutor, there can be no doubt that in his life as a Pharisee he was, at times at least, and probably with increasing frequency and intensity, greatly dissatisfied with his general moral condition. The passages in his epistles in which he speaks with such emphasis and feeling of the unhappy condition of men under the law must certainly reflect his personal experience, even if they were not based wholly upon that experience. If he had fancied that he had attained full acceptance with God; if his state under the law had been one of easy self-satisfaction, if he had found the law incapable of producing discontent with oneself (as Matthewson maintains), Paul could never honestly have written those burning passages respecting the effect of the law, which are familiar to every reader of his letters to the Galatians and the

Romans (Rom. iii. 20; vii. 5-25; Gal. ii. 9; iii. 22, 23). His own experience would have given the lie to every word.

It was then a conscientious and upright man, ill at ease with himself, who rode from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute the Christians; haunted perhaps by vague doubts which he could not wholly suppress respecting the rightfulness of this very mission, certainly dissatisfied at times with all his success as a Pharisee, painfully aware that his highest success was after all a failure.

7. Up to the time that he met Jesus in the road leading to Damascus, Saul had not believed in a Messiah who was to suffer and rise again. It has indeed been disputed whether the Jews did or did not believe in a suffering Messiah. That the Jews of a later time spoke of the "woes of the Messiah," is beyond question; but the evidence outside of the New Testament seems to fall short of proving that a suffering Messiah was looked for by the Jews of Jesus' day. And if we turn to the New Testament itself, this seems to establish beyond question that the doctrine of a suffering Messiah was not the commonly accepted doctrine. Certainly the idea of a Messiah rejected by the nation was foreign to their thought. Peter (Matt. xvi. 16, 22), having just declared that Jesus is the Christ, cannot understand that he is to be rejected and put to death by his nation. The people say to Jesus (Jno. xii. 34): "We have heard out of the law that the Christ abideth forever, and how sayest thou the Son of Man must be lifted up?" "The Christ" and "being lifted up" are inconsistent predicates to them. The faith of the disciples that Jesus is the Christ was completely discomfited by his death. Till Jesus opens their hearts to understand the things prophesied concerning him, it apparently never occurs to them that his suffering and death are only another evidence of his Messiahship. Paul's speech at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts xiii. 27) seems to be almost a direct assertion that the Jews of Jesus' day did not look for a suffering Messiah; in his speech at Thessalonica (Acts xvii. 3) he sets forth the doctrine of a Messiah suffering and raised from the dead not as a familiar but an unfamiliar doctrine; and to the Corinthians (1 Cor. i. 23) he speaks of Christ crucified as to the Jews a stumblingblock. These passages seem deci-

sive as to the general state of opinion; and this in turn makes it evident that the very fact of the death of Jesus (especially his death at the hands of the Jewish leaders, who thus emphatically rejected him) would be to Saul, the Pharisee, a great obstacle to the acceptance of him as the Messiah. Moreover, this obstacle was in his case unrelieved by any personal acquaintance with Jesus, such as in the case of Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea, acted to overcome their dogmatic objections to him. From the point of view of the Pharisaic dogmatics it was impossible to accept Jesus as the Messiah. The argument against him was short and easy. The Messiah does not die, still less does he die rejected by his own nation; Jesus did die thus rejected; therefore Jesus is not the Messiah.

With this was necessarily connected the denial of the resurrection of Jesus. Such denial was based not on any hostility to the doctrine of the resurrection in itself considered, nor on any unwillingness to admit the resurrection of the Messiah, except as this would have involved the admission of his death; but on the unwillingness to admit that the impostor Jesus could have received such divine attestation of his pretended Messiahship. It was a postulate alike of Jewish and of Christian thinking that the resurrection of Jesus was evidence of the validity of his claims, divine attestation that he was what he claimed to be. This appears on the Jewish side in the endeavor of the Jews to suppress the evidence of his resurrection by bribing the guards to say that his disciples stole him away; it appears in the fact that those who were convinced that Jesus was raised from the dead accepted him as Messiah and Savior, and in the opposition which the unbelieving Jews constantly manifested to the proclamation of the resurrection. It appears on the Christian side in the constant urging of the resurrection of Jesus as a reason for accepting Jesus (Acts ii. 24 ff.; iv. 33). This is, indeed, usually accompanied by the insistence that the Old Testament had predicted the resurrection of the Messiah, because the argument thus became doubly forcible; but it is also employed without such reference to the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts iii. 15). Paul especially lays constant emphasis on the resurrection,

using it with Jews in connection with prophecy (Acts xiii. 33 ff), and with Gentiles without such connection (Acts xviii. 31), and in his letter to the Roman Christians referring to the divine sonship of Jesus as established by the fact of the resurrection (Rom. i. 4). The matter then stood thus: Denying the doctrine of a suffering Messiah led, since Jesus had died, to the denial of his Messiahship. Denial of his Messiahship necessarily involved the denial of his resurrection, since his resurrection would have been a divine attestation of this Messianic claim.

8. There is no direct evidence that Paul felt any hostility to the personal character of Jesus. His profound moral earnestness, his eager quest after righteousness, and the readiness with which he accepted Christ when once the dogmatic obstacles to faith were broken down, lead us to believe that he would have been strongly attracted by the character of Jesus. He had not burned out his soul with sensualism, nor had he frozen it up with formalism. Righteousness, in the sense of character acceptable to God, was still for him the great thought of life. He had, indeed, sought it in a wrong way; his zeal had not been according to knowledge; but his very consciousness of failure despite the degree of success which he had attained is evidence that righteousness had not become a mere empty form, had not been degraded into a mean and unworthy travesty of the real thing. That there was an antagonism between the character of Jesus and the ideals of Saul created by the lowliness of Jesus and the spirit of self-sufficiency which had doubtless been cultivated in Saul by the Pharisaic dogmas, has already been suggested and must not be overlooked. But even in this respect the consciousness of failure already referred to is evidence that this antagonism was not in his case at its highest. It is just here that we are led to believe there existed the greatest difference between Saul and his fellow Pharisees. Many of these seem to have been repelled—at least not to have been at all attracted—by the character of Jesus. There is much reason to think that if Saul had known Jesus he would have become a follower of him while he was still among men.

We may see, then, that there were four obstacles to Paul's

acceptance of Jesus, not simply as the Messiah, but as his Lord and Savior; two dogmatic or intellectual, two moral.

(a) He did not believe in a rejected and suffering Messiah, and Jesus had unquestionably been rejected and had suffered.

(b) He believed in righteousness by law, and Jesus had continually taught that the only way of approach to God and acceptance with God was through faith in himself, Jesus.

(c) In accordance with this last named belief, he was seeking for righteousness in his own strength, was depending on himself rather than on God, was destitute of that poverty of spirit which is the first and indispensable qualification for Christian disciple-ship.

(d) He was resisting the evidence and the influences tending to show that his present course was wrong.

On the other hand, it must be said that he had certain moral advantages which were calculated to prepare him to accept Jesus.

(a) His moral earnestness.

(b) His eager desire to be righteous before God, and his freedom from vice and empty formalism.

(c) His dissatisfaction with his old life; the fact that, despite his blamelessness before the law he was yet not at peace with himself.

Now to such a man what would be the effect of such an experience as that which he had on the way to Damascus? His references to the matter afterward make it evident that he believed that he then saw Jesus Christ, that it was in his own view of it no mere subjective experience but an actual epiphany of the Lord Jesus himself.

First of all, it at once and instantly overthrew his first intellectual obstacle to the acceptance of Jesus. It has been pointed out above that his denial of the doctrine of a suffering Messiah led through the step of the rejection of the Messiahship of Jesus to the denial of the resurrection of Jesus. So, in reverse order, to see the risen and glorified Jesus is to be compelled to accept the fact of his resurrection. To accept the fact of his resurrection is to acknowledge his Messiahship. No dogmatic objection to the Messiahship of Jesus on the ground that he, contrary to the true idea of the Messiah, had died, could stand before the

convincing evidence flashed into his soul, that the Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah, who had unquestionably died, whom he had rejected as an imposter, was now occupying the place of divine power. It does not, indeed, at once interpret to him the Old Testament prophecies, does not enable him to see how the doctrine of a suffering Messiah is to be got from those Scriptures in which he had hitherto been unable to find it, but it does at once compel recognition of Jesus' claim to Messiahship. Interpretation of Scripture can come later. Now his objections are simply battered down *vi et armis*, by the superior might of the argument of the visible appearance of Jesus of Nazareth.

Secondly, and not less important, it at once demolished his confidence in the righteousness that is attainable in law. We have seen that there is reason to believe that he was already ill at ease in this matter. But now in one blow the whole structure of self-acquired righteousness is overthrown. He is, himself, the consummate flower of Pharisaism, the highest product of righteousness attainable under the system of law, and yet it is revealed in this revelation of Jesus Christ that he has been fighting against God himself. In the very moment when he was most zealously seeking after righteousness, in the very moment of this highest success along the line of legalism he is nevertheless in rebellion against God,—a rebellion which, though in a sense unconscious, is not merely formal, but open and actual.

It should not be overlooked that the very perfection of Saul's obedience to the law before his conversion was an important element in this new conviction. If his life had been gross and coarse, or empty and hollow, the demonstration of the futility of righteousness under the law would have been far less complete, or might have even failed altogether.

That Paul at once perceived how much was involved in this overthrow of his former view is by no means probable. In intellectual matters we may perceive that the foundation of our thinking has been shattered without at once perceiving how much of the superstructure must go down with the ruin of the foundation. Still less is the rearing of a new superstructure involved in the overthrow of the foundations of an old one. But the real

significance of the change which was involved in this fatal blow at the very foundations of all legalistic schemes for attaining righteousness, the importance of the far-reaching consequences which were to issue from it and which only needed a suitable occasion to develop them, it is scarcely possible to overestimate. In fact, almost all Paul's subsequent theology is but the unfolding of the logical consequences of the discovery which, as in a flash of lightning, he made when he was smitten down as he approached Damascus. The prominence of the doctrine of the resurrection in his teachings is of course at once explained by reference to this experience. It would also of course soon drive him to inquire afresh whether the Old Testament did indeed teach a suffering and rising Messiah, and the results of this study appear in his arguments both in his speeches in Acts and in his letters. But it is especially in his doctrine of justification by faith, and of the inability of the law even to sanctify him who is already justified, that we see the clearest results of this experience. The stages by which he reached his full doctrine, his firm conviction that the law cannot justify, his determined opposition to the circumcision of the Gentiles, his rejection of law even as agency in the building of character,—when and how each of these became clear to him, it is impossible for us certainly to determine. But they were all really implied in this Damascus experience. This particular phase of the subject deserves possibly a fuller treatment than it has ever received, certainly a larger exposition than the present brief reference to it.

It remains to ask what effect the epiphany of Jesus had upon the moral obstacles which stood in the way of Saul's acceptance of him as the Messiah and his Savior.

It is evident that the first of these, the seeking of righteousness by his own strength, dependence on law as against faith, could remain after the demonstration of the futility of the method only by obstinate resistance to evident duty. The same is true of the second obstacle, viz.: resistance to the influences tending to show that his present course was wrong. He had been resisting evidence; here is overwhelming evidence. He had been deceived by the darkness of his own soul, but here is light.

His words "What shall I do, Lord?" seem to show that in fact both obstacles were swept away at once and instantly. "The heavenly vision" is immediately effective and a marvellous change is wrought in the soul of Saul. This change is manifestly one of profound moral significance. The spirit of self-dependence bars God out of the soul, and throws the soul back upon its own inadequate resources. Self-dependence means disappointment, failure, despair to every earnest soul, and no one has more vividly and faithfully portrayed to us the pain and anguish of an earnest soul depending on itself than the apostle Paul himself. Faith opens the door to God and brings light and hope where before were failure and anguish, and the apostle more than any other New Testament writer has set forth the victory of faith. These two pictures could only have been drawn by one who had himself passed from the one experience to the other.

But was the change which took place in Saul at this time such a change as we now call conversion? Is it correct in modern terminology to designate the Damascus event as Saul's conversion? This of course depends upon one's definition of conversion. Probably, however, we may assume that the term signifies that profound moral change by which a soul holding an essentially wrong attitude toward God and righteousness comes to take an attitude which is, fundamentally at least, right. Coming to a closer definition, probably most persons who use the term conversion at all would maintain that he should be said to be converted who takes righteousness, (employing this term in a broad and inclusive sense,) as his supreme aim, and faith in Christ as the means of attaining such righteousness. Doubtless there might be much difference of opinion if we should still further define the terms righteousness and faith in Christ. We may rest however, for our present purpose in the definition as now given, and inquire whether Saul's "conversion" included these two elements. That it involved the second there can be no doubt. His own description of his conversion given in Phil. iii. 4-9 clearly describes it as an abandonment of the principle of righteousness and the acceptance of faith instead thereof; and

with this accords all that he has written in his various letters both concerning the nature of the change through which he himself passed, and concerning the nature of the gospel way of salvation in general.

But was not the first element,—the choice of righteousness as his supreme object of endeavor already present; and if so is the absence of the second a fatal defect? Can one of them exist without the other, and if so which is really essential to a fundamentally right attitude of soul? Does the coupling of the spirit of self-dependence, the endeavor to attain righteousness through the law, to the eager desire to be righteous, merely hinder the realization of that desire, or does it fatally vitiate it, or even demonstrate that it is already false and merely specious? Or on the other hand does the existence of the sincere desire to be righteous show that faith is already germinally present, latent in the desire to be righteous, and waiting only further enlightenment to bring it forth into full exercise?

Let it be granted at the outset that, as the New Testament teaches, faith is the only right, in the end the only successful, method of attaining righteousness. Granting this, it seems necessary to make double answer to our questions. On the one hand if righteousness is really the supreme desire of the soul, in this desire there is latent the true method of attaining it, viz., faith. In this desire, if only it be the supreme choice of the soul, there is contained the promise and potency of faith, since in this supreme devotion to righteousness is involved the willingness, even the desire, to adopt that means which will lead to its attainment. But on the other hand the absence of faith, certainly the repudiation of faith, may be,—must we not say usually is?—the index of the fact that the desire for righteousness is not supreme, that the soul desires righteousness indeed, but desires it subject to the condition that it shall be wrought out in self-dependence. This is to make not righteousness, but self, supreme. Which of these supposed cases correctly represents the attitude of Saul in the days of his Pharisaism? If the former, if before this time righteousness had become in very truth the supreme object of his choice, if he had striven for

righteousness in law only because under the stress of a false and misleading education he believed that this was the divinely appointed way, then his was at bottom only an intellectual error, and that which wrought the change in him, important for himself and the world as it was, was only an access of light, not a moral transformation of soul. If on the other hand the experience of Saul corresponded to the second supposed case, if eager as was his desire to be righteous, he had nevertheless up to this time desired it subject to the condition that it be attained in dependence on himself, then his rejection of faith had been also a rejection of righteousness and a choice of self. In that case also his acceptance of Jesus by faith was at the same time the supreme choice of righteousness. In the one act he elected the only right object of endeavor and the only successful way of its attainment. Perhaps it is impossible to decide positively in which of these two ways we rightly conceive of Saul's experience. Yet the balance of evidence seems to be in favor of the second view. All that the apostle says about the sinfulness of his Pharisaic life, describing himself as a blasphemer, and a persecutor, insolently proud, chief of sinners, implies that he did not look upon that period of his life as one of innocent ignorance and latent faith. The very expression which most mitigates the severity of his self-condemnation—I did it ignorantly in unbelief—seems introduced only to explain how one so hostile to God could at all have been rescued (1 Tim. i 13-16), and merely shows that he was not one who with full perception of the nature of his acts resisted God. No reference which the apostle makes to the change itself seems appropriately to apply to a transformation which, however important, was at bottom only intellectual. The evidence from his general conception of the fundamental importance of faith is indirect but very important. Certainly he always speaks as if the difference between righteousness by law and righteousness by faith was for those to whom he wrote absolutely fundamental. There are not lacking passages in which he recognizes that on the broad plane of a universal divine government, taking in heathen as well as those to whom God's special revelation had come, the great crucial

question could not be expressed in terms of faith, i. e., as the word would necessarily be understood, conscious and explicit faith. Yet with respect to those to whom he writes, those to whom God has been revealed in the law and in the Gospel, the possibility of righteousness or of right attitude to God without faith in Christ is never so much as thought of. This could scarcely have been if he had looked back to a time in his own life, when though in essentially right attitude toward God and righteousness he had been openly rejecting and opposing Christ. We are almost driven to say that if Saul had before his Damascus experience made such choice of righteousness as that his attitude toward God was already fundamentally right, and his conversion a change of opinion rather than of heart, he himself never discovered that fact. While therefore the evidence falls short of entire decisiveness, it seems to tend strongly to the conclusion that Saul's conversion was such in the deepest sense of that term—a choice of righteousness and a surrender to God through faith in Christ; an act fundamentally changing his attitude toward God and fundamentally affecting his character.